

New Archaeological discoveries in Roman Byzantine Galilee

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During the last three years, the Institute for Galilean Archaeology by itself and in collaboration with other universities made some important archaeological discoveries.

1. On the summit of Tel Rekhesh, a Biblical Tel in eastern Lower Galilee the remains of a Roman period Jewish farmstead were discovered. The Institute joined with a team of Japanese universities who were excavating the Bronze and Iron Age periods, with the purpose of uncovering the remains from the Roman period. The rooms of this farmstead were dated to the 1st-2nd centuries CE. In the southwestern side, a large room of 9x9 m was exposed. It has a bench of limestone ashlar around its four walls and was probably used as a "private" synagogue, belonging to the owner of the farmstead. This is the first rural synagogue found in the Galilee from the Second Temple period, the same time as that of Jesus and his followers in the Galilee, and is representative (on a small scale) of the rural synagogues which Jesus visited.
2. El-Araj is a site on the northern shore of the Kinneret, near the Jordan river. Since the end of the 19th century it is one of the two main candidates for the identification of Bethsaida. During the last 30 years, it was the site of e-Tel, 2 km northeast from el-Araj which became the "known" as Bethsaida resulting from intensive excavations by Prof. Rami Arav. Arav also checked the remains of el-Araj and declared that it was occupied only in the Byzantine period. The excavation carried out at el-Araj are currently being led by Prof. Mordechai Aviam from the Kinneret college and Prof. R. Stephen Notley from NYACK college New York. We identified three layers: below the surface is a 12th century CE sugar factory. Below the sugar factory are remains from the Byzantine period 5th-7th centuries CE, probably a monastery. 1.5 m below the Byzantine floor we discovered a rich Roman period layer (1st -3rd centuries CE). The remains included clear evidence of a Roman type bathhouse. These remains are in an altitude of 211m below sea level which proves that Arav's reconstruction of a large lagoon stretching as far as e-Tel is erroneous. We suggest that as a result of our findings, the site of el-Araj is a better candidate to be identified as the village of Bethsaida, the village of the apostles.
3. Dr. Jacob Ashkenazi and Prof. Mordechai Aviam from the Institute for Galilean archaeology are currently conducting a large scale research, financed by the Israel Science Foundation, entitled "Economic growth and religious materiality in Christian Galilee in Late Antiquity: Archeological and Literary Analysis". During the last two summers, we excavated five churches in western Galilee: two churches at Kh. Karkara, the eastern church at Kh. Eirav, a church at Kh. Gilon and the northern apse at Kh. Hesheq. Plans of the churches were made, parts of the mosaic floors were uncovered, architectural fragments were discovered, and mainly, as a declared goal of the team, seven new inscriptions were discovered, unveiling new information about Christian life in the Galilee.

4. The excavations at the Jewish village at Shikhin, 2 km north of Sepphoris, are being led by Prof. James R. Strange from Samford University, Alabama and Prof. Mordechai Aviam from the Kinneret College. The team discovered clear evidence for the production of heavy pottery vessels at the site as was identified by other scholars some years ago. The most interesting discovery is the local production of oil lamps of different types, and especially a decorated, spatulated type which is similar to the "southern" type (Darom lamps). The production was at the same time as in the Judean Shefela (end of the 1st to the 2nd centuries CE). More than 30 stone molds for lamps were discovered, some 2.000 shards of lamps as well as about 30 complete ones, and a small pottery kiln for oil lamps.